

RĀGS AROUND THE CLOCK

A Handbook for North Indian
Classical Music, with Online
Recordings in the Khayāl Style



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Music by Vijay Rajput



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Introduction: Origins, Overview, Contexts

This book has been a long time coming. Its roots go back to a teaching initiative implemented by myself (David Clarke, henceforth DC), Vijay Rajput (henceforth VR), and tabla maestro Shahbaz Hussain, at Newcastle University in the late 2000s. Since that time, we have together offered short courses—modules, in UK higher-education parlance—to Music students, under the banner *Indian Music in Practice*. Our aim is simple: we offer students the opportunity to ‘learn about Indian music by *doing* it’. To elaborate, and to pinpoint the spirit of the present compendium: we seek to cultivate two-way traffic between practice and theory: between practice informed by technical, historical, cultural and aesthetic knowledge, and knowledge experienced through embodied musical engagement. The practice in question is the *guru-śiṣyā paramparā* (master-disciple lineage), in which students learn face-to-face from teachers steeped in their musical heritage. Our own students do this not to become professional performers (which would take vastly more than a module or two), but rather to learn through a lived encounter with the music and its cultural and historical situation.

Rāgs Around the Clock develops resources produced during this venture, putting them into the public domain where they may be used and adapted under their Creative Commons licence by students, teachers and practicing musicians—indeed by anyone who enjoys and would like to know more about Hindustani classical music in general and the *khayāl* vocal style in particular. Further, these materials are supplemented with analytical writings offered as a contribution to research in the field. The compendium is designed both as a set of resources from which readers can select as they wish, and as a monograph which can be read in a sequence essentially progressing from simpler treatments to more complex ones.

As the first word in our title suggests, a key concept is *rāg*—arguably *the* fundamental notion in Indian classical music. *Rāg* elusively denotes a number of things: the way melody in general is organised and shaped; a kind of modal system; a corresponding world of feeling and imagination. Musicians also talk of performing particular *rāgs*—from a corpus of hundreds (some claim thousands), each with its own name. And an essential part of a vocalist’s or melody-instrumentalist’s training is to acquire a repertoire of *rāgs* and associated songs or compositions. In the Hindustani tradition, musicians need to know *rāgs* suitable for various times of the day or night—for each *rāg* has its appropriate time, or *samay*. Hence, *Rāgs Around the Clock*. Hence also the title of the book’s first companion album: *Rāg samay cakra*. Here, VR sings a cycle (*cakra*) of *rāgs* according to their performing times, from dawn to the small hours; he also includes two seasonal *rāgs*—Megh, for the rainy season, and Basant, for the springtime—illustrating a further connection between *rāg* and cyclic time.

While *rāg* performances often last the best part of an hour, and sometimes longer, an accomplished musician can capture the essence of a *rāg* in just a few minutes. On *Rāg samay cakra*, VR presents fourteen *rāgs* in capsule performances lasting around five minutes each. The inspiration here was *The Raga Guide*, a scholarly introduction to Hindustani *rāg* in book form by Joep Bor (1999) and fellow scholars, with attached CDs comprising concise performances by internationally renowned artists. The musicians follow the example of the earliest recorded performers of Indian music, who, working within the limitations of 78 rpm (revolutions per minute) gramophone technology, showed themselves ‘capable of bringing out the essence of the ragas in just a few minutes’ (Bor et al. 1999: 5). Our initial motive was to curate an album for VR’s students, comprising *rāgs* he commonly teaches and particularly cherishes. While our own collection is less epic (featuring fourteen *rāgs* rather than seventy-four), it is more explicitly focused on the particular *gāyakī* (vocal idiom) of a single artist and on the *khayāl* style. Despite their brevity and didactic purpose, the performances are fully idiomatic—intended to be musically satisfying in their own right.

To complement these compressed renditions, we also include a second album, *Twilight Rāgs from North India*, which presents two concert-length performances lasting around thirty-five minutes each. Here, we showcase two *rāgs* fundamental to Hindustani classical music, and redolent of the passage from night to day and vice versa: Rāg Bhairav, sung at sunrise, and Rāg Yaman, sung after sunset. The long-form presentation gives VR time to explore the musical depths of each *rāg* through the many facets of the *khayāl* style.

These two albums, then, form the unifying focus around which the four parts of *Rāgs Around the Clock* are organised. Part 1 comprises a series of essays that introduce readers to relevant theoretical concepts and contexts, and that illustrate how musical practice is permeated by convention, culture and history. These accounts are mostly short, mirroring the compression of the performances on *Rāg samay cakra*. Like those recordings, the essays may be imbibed in any order, though they are similarly organised in a meaningful sequence. They present selected concepts that are part of the common working knowledge of musicians. Traditionally, this knowledge has been transmitted within a learning culture shaped by myth as much as scholarship, and no less entwined in ideology than any other musical practice, from whichever corner of the globe. This is not to say that the myths and ideologies of Indian classical music have not been productive or enabling; indeed, they are inseparable from its history and discourses. But it is to point to the need for commentary and analysis also informed by critically aware research—a principle we have sought to uphold by drawing most of our information from peer-reviewed scholarship, and by distinguishing this from the tropes and narratives of the tradition.

Part 2 presents supporting materials for *Rāg samay cakra*: a commentary on each *rāg*; a notation of the song (*bandīś*) chosen for its performance; and a transliteration and translation of the text, produced in collaboration with Jonathan Katz and Imre Bangha. On the one hand, these materials serve as a resource for students wanting to learn (or learn about) these *rāgs* and their *bandīśes*. On the other hand, this collection adds to numerous other published examples of *rāg* curation in online and offline formats. The most eminent of these include not only *The Raga Guide*, but also Suvarnalata Rao and Wim van der Meer’s website, *Music in Motion* (<https://autrimncpa.wordpress.com/>), which presents annotated

transcriptions playable in real time of commissioned *rāg* recordings by world-class artists. To these we may add Patrick Moutal's *A Comparative Study of Selected Hindustānī Rāga-s* (1997/1991) and its related website (<http://www.moutal.eu/>); and Nicolas Magriel and Lalita du Perron's magisterial *The Songs of Khayāl* (2013), whose second volume presents painstaking transcriptions and sound clips of numerous *bandīśes* from historic recorded performances. Valuable examples of non-academic online collections include *Ocean of Ragas* by Sudhir V. Gadre (<http://www.oceanofragas.com/>) and *Tanarang* by Prakash Vishwanath Ringe and Vishwajeet Vishwanath Ringe (<http://www.tanarang.com/>).

In Parts 3 and 4 of *Rāgs Around the Clock*, I (DC) offer detailed commentaries on the book's two companion albums in a series of article-length essays that explore the different stages of a *rāg* performance. Part 3 revisits *Rāg samay cakra*: in separate sections, I explore the questions 'How do you sing an *ālāp*?' and 'How do you sing a *choṭā khayāl*?' These are questions of obvious practical relevance to performers; and this way of couching things similarly invites listeners to understand the music from the singer's perspective. It also seeks to abstract some of the deeper principles of *khayāl* through close analysis of VR's performances. In what is one of the book's main research strands, I attempt to codify these principles as a set of theoretical rubrics in order to formalise what gurus convey orally and demonstrate musically to their students. At the same time, this inquiry builds in its own critique of the status of such rubrics. On the one hand, they tantalisingly point to a possible performance grammar that Hindustani musicians might unconsciously imbibe during their long training. On the other hand, when tested against practice, such rubrics sometimes become fuzzy or provisional; their status tends toward the heuristic—a term I use a lot in this book, appropriately enough, given that pedagogy is among its subjects.

These and other ideas are pursued further in Part 4, which considers the second album, *Twilight Rāgs from North India*. In Section 4.2, I extend the analysis of *choṭā khayāl* principles from Part 3, this time looking at VR's extended *drut khayāl* from his Bhairav performance. Among other things, I explore the phenomenology of the *khayāl* performer as they respond to the perpetual question: what do I do next? In an adaptation of ideas from Daniel Dennett's multiple drafts theory of consciousness (1991), I conjecture whether every rubric or principle of performance might not vie for selection at any given moment within a pandemonium of possibilities operating below the threshold of consciousness.

To dramatise a little: what begins to emerge here is the thought that to perform *khayāl* involves a negotiation between the forces of order, regulated by convention, and the energy of the inchoate, simmering in the unconscious of the individual performer. I speculate about this phenomenology further in a dialogue with my fellow *śiṣyā* Sudipta Roy in the Epilogue of this book; but before this, in Section 4.3, I thematise similar tensions in an analysis of VR's *barā khayāl* from his Yaman performance on *Twilight Rāgs*. I seek to do justice to this, the weightiest stage of a *khayāl* performance, by showing how its essence lies in a deep-rooted tension between metrical and anti-metrical orderings of time—as captured in the terms *nibaddh* and *anibaddh*.

It is in the nature of Indian classical music that no artist is an iconoclast; rather each adds their personal voice to the panoply of their forebears and contemporaries. So too with Indian-music scholarship—including the present collaboration between VR and myself: what is new is not a paradigm-shifting reset of known parameters, but rather a

re-synthesis of received understanding shaped by our individual backgrounds and by our longstanding *guru-śiṣyā* relationship. Viewed within the wider musicological landscape, *Rāgs Around the Clock* joins a growing tradition of collaboration between Indian and western musical and musicological investigators. Our predecessors (and their works) include Neil Sorrell and sārāṅgī player Ram Narayan (1980); Martin Clayton and *khayāl* singer Veena Sahasrabuddhe (1998); sarod player Ali Akbar Khan and George Ruckert (2021/1998); and dhrupad singer Ritwik Sanyal and Richard Widdess (2004). Such cross-cultural collaborations matter. They matter in the wider global dissemination of one of the world's significant classical traditions, and they matter in signifying a maturation of the western reception of Indian music; each work enriches that tradition by creating new knowledge and perspectives. We hope that the musical and intellectual contribution of *Rāgs Around the Clock* will in its own way play a part in this continuing inter-cultural dialogue.